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VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE IN PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
AS THE RESULT OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT DURING THE TRANSITION STAGE
FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO ADVANCED EDUCATION

Mirta Gavilán^{*} - María Laura Castignani^{**}

Abstract

This work proposes to seek for the factors related to the choices that people with special educational needs make as the result of the visual impairment, during the transition stage from high school to advanced education.

Therefore, we have taken into consideration that Vocational Guidance and the transition towards adulthood get specific characteristics in case of visually impaired young people, particularly in what's related to continue with advanced education.

The focus of this work is to be able to clarify the existence of factors that make this transition stage easier or harder, through the observation of visually impaired and blind people who complete high school. This matter has aroused interest and concern about the strategies to follow to ensure the successful entrance and remaining in the selected advanced education. However, if we don't know the factors involved in the described fact, it's difficult to design an appropriate intervention strategy.

Then, in order to take acknowledge about the specific issues of visually impaired young people who complete high school, we chose a special school for this disability and some students who will join this project.

Key words: visual impairment – educational guidance – advanced education

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Introduction

This work is a part of the current investigation project that corresponds to a post-graduate scholarship from the CONICET (National Council of Scientific Investigation).

We've analyzed the reasons that guide the visually impaired people's choices in the transition from school to advanced education, depending on whether it's about blindness, moderate or severe visually impairment. In addition, we've compared the choices made by visually impaired people according to their disability degree and with the sighted people choices. So, this work arises from the scarce information about this issue, and on the corresponding approaches and intervention strategies to those with this disability.

We've considered what's related to the nature of the programs of educational guidance that are available in our area, to assess if they consider the characteristics of the visually impaired people and if so, to know what particular actions are implemented according to the type of disability.

In the first place, we'll define the problem, after this we display the theoretical frame and backgrounds and finally we'll describe the fieldwork carried out with the selected students from the special school dedicated to visual disability.

At last, found results are shown and we'll suggest some guidance interventions for visually impaired persons.

Theoretical frame and backgrounds

This research is based on the Theoretical and Operative Model in Guidance (Gavilán, 2006). This point of view considers guidance in a broad sense and includes all responses choices that people should find along lifetime. Therefore, considering the complexity

theory of the current world, it's necessary to include other fields and disciplinary knowledge, interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary, and their interaction as well.

This model holds that “the analysis of the guidance history and its reference theories show us that it has been resting in different paradigms over time and space”. According to this ideas and based on her research, the author provides evidence of the efficacy to consider three main areas: prevention, process and imaginary. Besides she considers the need to widen the areas of Guidance: health, education, employment and social policies. The inclusion of the above mentioned fields means the expansion of guidance intervention which provides support or supplements the choices in the course of lifetime. Guidance should also include all people without exception, reason why counselors, according to each action field, must be permanently updated “in order to give responses to individuals with special needs and to all the cultural diversity, linguistic, ethnic and social that involve the multiculturalism and the inter-culturalism” (Gavilán, 2006, p. 192).

These changes have created a new situation in the guidance field to the extent it considers both, the deepening and development of each specific area of knowledge, and besides it opens to new inter and trans-disciplinary places in jointly and in parallel.

In this way the practice of guidance is faced from a theoretical and empiric approach that “reveals the necessary respect for each tradition and disciplinary progress and the search of new frontiers of knowledge that provide the interactions and combinations among disciplines. Axis, fields and knowledge are all integrated in a new theoretical and operational model in guidance”. (Gavilán, 2006, p. 193). Guidance is defined as “a set of strategies and tactics that the specialized counselor applies for assisting the guided person to develop an educational/personal/labor project throughout life by means of an

understanding, reflexive and committed attitude, individual or collectively”. (Gavilán, 2006, p. 194).

So as counselors, we have to accompany young people with disabilities “encouraging them in finding tools to actively join the world of labor and/or to remain in advanced education and/or training, enabling them to carry out personal projects, and avoiding social exclusion”. (Castignani & Gavilán, 2009, p. 218).

Concepts on disability

Along history, there have prevailed various ideas and models which result the bases of the treatment usually received by those with disabilities. According to Palacios & Romañach (2007), the term “disability” has to be replaced by “functional diversity”, as the former is related to the deficit, the limitation or restriction.

All these terms comes from the traditional model, from the medical or rehabilitator perspective, that features the different person as someone biologically imperfect who must be “fixed” to restore “normality” patterns that have never existed. In front of this pattern, some authors will refer to the *Social Model* on the disability concept, held in USA and England. It is about the “diversity model” based on the principles of the *Independent Living Movements* that demand the consideration of those with disabilities as a valuable being on oneself, due to their diversity. This model reveals the crucial intent for each person to keep control on their own lives, choosing those options that minimize dependence in the everyday life. It’s considered that the causes of the functional diversity are neither religious nor scientific but social, thus solutions shouldn’t point to the person concerned, but to society.

This model is closely related to the inclusion of some intrinsic values of Human Rights and longs to promote respect for human dignity, personal equality and freedom, to promote social inclusion by means of the respect of certain principles, such as: independent living, non discrimination, universal accessibility and dialogue, among others.

Encouraged by these ideas of equality on the rights of those with disabilities, many family groups and also the very people concerned, have held a strong critique on medical care ideologies and actively collaborated in the development and sanction of different laws and treaties in this field.

The best example of these developments is displayed in the last international convention on the rights of those with disabilities (UN, 2006). This convention provides rules of non-discrimination and actions that states should implement to ensure that people with disabilities will have the same rights that other people. “People with disabilities include those who have long-term impairments, physical, mental, intellectual or sensory, that when interacting with different barriers, may hinder their effective and full participation in society in equal conditions that the others”. (UN, 2006, p. 4).

Thus, *disability* is understood as the result of the relationship between the one who have the impairment and the barriers than hinder his/her participation in society like the others (the word “barrier” means something that makes impossible to make a task or achieve a goal).

The diversity concept refers to accept and respect individual differences as inherent conditions to human nature, and to the possibility of providing responses to the educational needs of each one. “The special educational needs are those experienced by people who require support or resources not usually available in their educative context”. (Educational Ministry, 1998). This concept focus essentially on the problem

of the specific demands of disability which is no longer the central issue nor the factor that determines learning itself, to become the result of the permanent interaction among disability, their variables and the context, particularly the educative one. Concerning the latter, can be referred the Warnock Report on 1978, performed in England, which establishes the foundations for special educative needs, for *integration and inclusion*. In this report it's mentioned that "all children have educative needs (...) all children have the right to education (...) No child will be considered un-educable (...) the educational aims are the same for everyone" (Aguilar Montero, 1991, p. 1).

Regarding the inclusive school, we can find a significant background in the "Salamanca Statement of Principles, Policies and Practices for Special Educational Needs", of 1994 (Echeita Sarrionandía & Verdugo Alonso, 2004), which establishes that the purpose is to promote education for everyone, encouraging integrative education and training schools to attend all children, particularly those with special educational needs. It's longed that all children can learn together whenever it's possible, and education in special schools should be an exception when regular classes can't suit the child educational or social needs, or if it's necessary for the welfare of the impaired child or the other children.

In this context it's possible to recognize changes on special education paradigms, from a traditional approach based on a medical and psychometrical model, focusing to the deficit, towards a new one that emphasizes the need of providing a comprehensive response to the demands derived from the necessity of special education. Therefore, categories that "classify" persons depending on their impairment and its degree are suppressed, and we talk about special educational needs resulting from disabilities.

Regarding the World Report on Disability (UN, 2011) about 15% of world population is in disability condition. There are multiple interventions to surpass the disadvantages related to this status that vary according to different contexts.

There is an International Convention on Disabled Person's Rights, approved by the United Nations in 2006 that has been included to our national legislation in 2008 (Law N° 26378). It aims "to promote, protect and ensure the full equality of human rights and freedoms to those with disabilities and also promote the respect for their inherent dignity". The adopted international classification of disability defines it as a general term which includes deficits, action limitations and different kinds of restrictions for involvement. Disability is the result of the interaction between people with bad health conditions (such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, etc.) with personal or environmental factors (such as negative attitudes, discomfort in transport and/or public buildings and lack of social support).

In the above mentioned convention it is clearly specified that those with disabilities should access to technical and guidance programs, employment services, permanent professional training, in addition to the promotion of development of vocational and professional rehabilitation programs, keeping and returning of their jobs.

As legal backgrounds that ensure the rights to those with disabilities in advanced education, we take into account: the modifications of the Advanced Education Law (24521, 25573 - 2002); the Latin-American and Caribbean report on Advanced Education 2000-2005; Metamorphosis on Advanced Education (IESALC -UNESCO, 2005); the Lisboa Declaration: young people's opinion on educational inclusion (2007) and the Manual for integration of Persons with disabilities in Advanced Education Institutions (National Association of Universities, México), among others.

As specific backgrounds in the visual impairment field, we consider the National Organization of Spanish Blind as our referent, whose most important purpose is to better the welfare of blind and visual impaired people all over Spain, besides it has several offices in different international contexts¹.

In the national context “the results of the National Survey of Persons with disabilities performed in 2002-2003 point out that the prevalence of impairment respect of the total population of 30,757,628 inhabitants is 7.1 %. When identifying the kind of disability, the survey shows the following: Motor 39.5%, Visual 22%, Mental 15.1% and Auditory 18%. Persons with visual impairments are statistically the second ones. (Grzona, 2009).

The Argentinean Association of Guidance Professionals reveals the data collected by Dr. Grisel Olivera Roulet (National Rehabilitation Service) who points out that in Argentina only the 7.6% of those with impairments have completed or gone beyond advanced level of education.

In the National University of La Plata, the commission on disability carried out a survey in 15 of their 17 academic staff in October 2011 to find out any disability conditions in teachers, students and university's staff. The data reveal the presence of: 23% with motor disability, sensory 41%, 13% visceral, mental 8% and psychic disability 15% (University Committee of the National University of La Plata)

¹ There are a lot of Works and researches made on this matter in different universities of this country. In the Complutense University from Madrid and Europe from Madrid (Abejón Mendoza, P.; Martínez Solana, M.Y & Terrón López, M.J., 2010); in the Salamanca University, the Thesis financed by the National Organization of Spanish Blind (Caballo Escribano, C. & Verdugo Alonso, M. A., 2001); in the Granada University (Rodríguez Fuentes, A. 2003). Besides they developed computer systems of self-help and guidance for students of high school (1998, 2003) that has been adapted to blind students as well. (Rivas, F., Tormos, M. J. & Martinez, B. , 2005, p 382).

We've showed the general background on the disability issue and guidance. For the purposes of this paper, we'll analyze the particular status of young people visually impaired.

"Visual disability" is a broad term which includes both, blind people and those with visual impairment. About this last category, although there is no global approach regarding its definition, we refer to the parameters of visual acuity (VA) and visual field (VF) for its assessment.

VA is described as "the ability of the eye for perceiving the object's details (which are seen commonly in the center of the retina). Therefore we'll have a better visual acuity, the better we see the details of what we are watching. The normal VA is 3/3 or 1, total blindness would be expressed as 0" (Cangelosi, D; 2006, pp. 61-62). Meanwhile it's considered that the VF is "the area that the eye can perceive simultaneously, without any movements (neither eyes nor the rest of the body)". (Cangelosi, D; 2006). The VF's measure is expressed in degrees, according to the sector of the field that the person can see.

There isn't a whole agree about the designation of this disability, for this reason some authors call it visual impairment and others low vision. To the purposes of this paper we chose the first one, and considering VA and VF, we understand that "someone is visually impaired when having a VA of 0.3 or less (3/10) and/or a VF of 20° or less". (Cangelosi, D; 2006, p. 63).

In order to know the specific conditions of the visually impaired students, we've selected a group of young people who are integrated into regular schools and also attend to a special education school.

Characteristics of the selected school of special education

This institution is leader in this issue, for this reason students go from different zones close to La Plata city.

The aims of school directors and teachers are related to assisting them in lifelong learning since their birth, to completely develop their potential and achieve their pedagogic integration, social and familiar.

Their trans-disciplinary staff includes:

The management team, that oversees the scholar running and organization.

The technical team, that is in charge of the admission, assessment and supervision of students, guiding the teaching-learning process.

The early stimulation service, where information is provided to support the full development of children (0 to 36 months old) considering their personal times and potentialities.

The integrative teachers are who establish the connection among the trans-disciplinary team of the school that involves integrated students, special school and parents. They also provide teachers with resources and materials according to the specific approach to visually impairment.

The special teachers, who attend at school the personal needs of students, such as: orientation and mobility, Braille, scholar support, audiology and speech, visual stimulation, manual orientation, musical education, basic activities of everyday life.

The regular teachers, who attend the students in order to place them, according to their characteristics, in the educational method and stage that corresponds: initial, high school, adults, special education or training. They also carry out a special approach to students that suffer other disabilities (multi-disabled and deaf-blind) to better the welfare of children and their families.

The educational approach of these students consists on enabling all capabilities that can be blocked due to the effect of disability. This is performed by rehabilitation techniques to develop mobility skills, personal tidiness, leisure, social relationships, etc. A regular follow-up is needed to adapt techniques to the new requirements that come with the school development.

General characteristics of selected students

They are teenagers who are completing high school and are integrated to regular schools, for this reason in this stage they don't need to go daily to the special school, but when requiring some specific scholar support.

Attendance is only compulsory to the regular school and this fact sometimes carries desertion to the special school. From the data collected by the key referents, we found out that many times this desertion is due to the denying of the disability, both the young people and their families, but most of the times, when the need of specific support becomes clear, they go back to the special school.

Of 10 selected students, 8 suffer of moderate visual impairment, 1 is blind and 1 has a severe visual impairment and for this reason he has to use techniques for blind people.

Here we are showing the outcomes gathered from the above mentioned sources. We'll group them into categories which arose from the young people themselves. We don't mean to make a generalization, but to display in a systematic way, the more frequent matters.

1. Major difficulties they encountered during the course of the educational way so far

Use of the blackboard, teacher's writing, inadequate light, teacher's poor availability to respond to their demands, resistance to recognize their deficit and to talk about it with teachers and classmates, resistance to use some tools as magnifying glasses, enlargements of texts, matters with too theoretical and extensive contents that requires much reading that cause tiredness (so they need pauses), lack of concentration, the impossibility of having the appropriate resources in time, lack of study habits, books or photocopies hardly legible, refusal to have a differential treatment with respect to other classmates, which often causes problem to keep pace with the rest of the group.

2. Use of Braille system and special technological resources

The blind students use Braille system and a screen reader, which is a special technological resource that makes easier and more comfortable the reading, using the PC instead of paper texts. The knowledge of these tools allowed these selected students to think about careers related to the artistic and design fields, in opposite of what happened years ago, when the only careers that could be considered were those which have the adequate literature adapted to visually impaired people.

We found that young people accept naturally these technologies, as a part of their education process, even when they require specific training. It differs from regular school teachers who if they aren't familiarized with some new technologies, often waste alternative and innovating methods, to take those traditional ones, designed for the "ideal" student.

If teachers use these tools and resources, the process of inclusion of visually impaired young persons will be easier in regular schools.

The rest of the selected students with moderate visually disability doesn't use specific technological resources and they manage the tools currently in use: mailing, social networks, messenger, etc.

3. Vocational Guidance / Guidance staff / Transition to advanced education

The regular schools where these students are integrated haven't guidance staff and when having, they are dedicated to emergencies that occur daily. So guidance interventions are informal, like for instance comments with professionals or teachers. As there aren't planned guidance strategies, we find that generally the institution professionals don't take into account the specific needs of visually impaired people for making their choices.

The guidance proposals don't deepen on the student's vocational aspects. We didn't find actions to stimulate an active role in the search of interests and the development of skills to get the desired achievements.

Vocational guidance group activities aren't carried out, however in the special school, all the teenagers of the institution are involved in workshops, thus they often talk about future.

In general, the regular school teachers don't consider the transition towards advanced education for these students, who will arise to specific needs in the future. Only in one case we've found a teacher who cared about a student and usually talk with him about some careers, its contents, and the adjustments that he should need.

4. Factors considered to the career choice

We've made a survey to the selected young people who were required to say in order of importance, which of the following factors they've considered for choosing a career.

1. Tasks made in the chosen profession
2. The friends' opinion
3. Parents' opinion
4. Interest in achieving social recognition
5. Economic factors
6. Adjustment conditions the university offers
7. Their visually impairment
8. Other factors

Usually these young people prioritize in their choice:

1. Tasks made in the chosen profession
2. Interest in achieving social recognition
3. Economic factors
4. Adjustment conditions the university offers
5. Their visually impairment

For the half of the selected students, the specific limitations arisen from their visual deficit aren't a decisive factor to choose a career. However, they consider that the support provided by the university and by the teachers, related to adjustments in bibliography, are helpful.

On the contrary, for the other half of the young people, among them the two blind ones, this factor is main concern as they recognize that due to their disability, some careers would be very difficult to sustain. However they don't refuse to think of a life plan, carrying out the tasks they're interested, taking into account the limitations arisen from their disability, but always having the necessary support to overcome them.

5. Curricular adjustments

In general these young people aren't familiar with the adjustments they need, and can only identify the enlargements of texts made by integrative teachers. We've realized that teachers don't advice to their students in these issues, so maybe in the future they aren't going to be able to clearly explain or request to professors the adaptations they need, for instance: methodological adjustments.

This point is related to the lack of concern of the transition stage, because while they are in high school, all adjustments are made by the special school. However this is against autonomy and independence that is what they will need when starting with advanced education.

The interviews with the key referents reveal that during teenage there usually appear resistance and refusal to use of enlarged texts, or to receive special treatment, different from their schoolmates, or to wear glasses, due to it's a life stage when, generally, they don't want to recognize their disability.

6. Advanced Education and/or employment

All selected students have thought of the chance of taking advanced studies, 6 of them at university level and 4 at professional training courses. Those who thought of training courses said they were afraid to take part of university, to be involved in the university massive lifestyle that could bring troubles because of their visual deficit.

Three of them have informal jobs and their project consisted in going on working and studying, because they currently help in supporting their homes.

7. Teachers' help in class

The interviews made to teachers and institutional staff from the regular school show that teachers aren't trained in teaching techniques that let them attend those with visual impairment. This poor training often becomes in an excess of assistance to the students. When we inquired to the selected students about the kind of support that professors provide, the most said that help usually is "excessive". So the class goes around these matters, often blocking the potentialities that the young people have to develop by their own.

Such an attitude becomes a burden for the students that feel they give the teacher an "extra work". We can assume that this attitude doesn't help to more self-sufficient performance that they will have to achieve when starting higher studies.

8. Main difficulties on learning due to disability

The selected students have no learning troubles as a consequence of their disability. 9 from 10 of them have achieved their scholar stage adequately and timely.

The main difficulties to learn some contents depend on the use of the board or about those subjects that involve much reading. Among the first ones we find mathematics, physical and chemical. They said they felt missed in class, confused and consequently they lose interest in these matters, precisely because of the above mentioned troubles. Among the second ones we find the humanistic matters, such as: history, philosophy, literature.

9. Characteristics of the transition towards higher education

In the selected visually impaired students we found that making a life plan related to the chance of taking advanced education begins similarly to those young people that don't suffer this disability, that is to say with a grieve process, related to the lost of the

previous role of high school pupil. Besides arise fears and unsteadiness, expectations related to the beginning of a new stage appear because university is involved and that means self-sufficiency plus all the new responsibilities that the “university life style” brings. Even when these issues don’t differ significantly from those without this disability, we’ve noticed that in those with visual impairment, these problems come more intensely.

We’ve considered Aznar y Gonzales Castañón’s contributions (2008) on the self-determination. He proposes five components (choices, freedom, responsibility, prominence, and inter-relational context) which are precisely the less developed by these students during their formal education. This fact leads them frequently to be unable to make independent choices.

Some suggestions to carry out guidance interventions with visually impaired people

Then, what is the contribution of vocational guidance for visually disabled people? Which strategies are used to promote the development of the needed skills to transition to advanced education? Which are the tools that counselors have to take into account for considering the “diversity”?

If we think about the Bohoslavsky’s clinical method (1985), we’ll take the interview as the central tool to reflect on guidance for visually impaired people. This instrument will let us recover the person itself in the disability. As we’ve developed in “Theoretical frame and backgrounds”, disability is not the determinant of the person identity, however, the counselor should know the characteristics of the disease and what way this may limit the self-sufficient performance particularly in each one. Thus, guidance interventions must be performed from a preventive and comprehensive strategy that in

first place, will aid in recognizing the social imagery that could become a barrier, and in second place in finding out the personal skills and resources to strengthen the abilities, trying to overcome the restrictions that the deficit leads.

From an interdisciplinary approach, we have to create strategies for these young people to have the instruments that will let them, not only achieve to advanced education, but also remain in this scholar degree and then be ready to be included in the labor world. So it's essential to have a network that allows thinking of new intervention strategies to attend each of these young people. A network is crucial because it helps in rethinking the counselor tasks, and as a result creating a multiplier effect for all institutions that assist to impaired people.

The use of special technologies (computer tools adapted to disabled users) is very important to those with visual impair and it can be considered a key to their learning process. The main troubles aroused to students when beginning higher education is related to get the study habit, because they have to build a new circuit that in high school was entirely supported by the school staff. In this new stage there are new challenges, for instance, students must talk to teachers and schoolmates about some special tools they need, they have to get the adapted literature in time and they have also to learn the time required to study and be ready for an exam. These activities should be practiced from a preventive point of view before completing high school to enable young people to achieve their life plans. We think that the counselor role here is crucial. He/she is included in the scholar staff to accompany teachers and students in making those adjustments that will let the disabled person carry out their advanced education equally to others. If including an interdisciplinary net, counselors may advice teachers to avoid that their unawareness in relation to this subject leads to drop-out, due to their disability.

The challenge as counselors consists in promoting the possibility to achieve a life project which involves work, education and personal life, to have chances to overcome their deficit, extend their potentialities and adapt personal motivations and skills to social requirements. From a point of view that includes diversity, we must also promote equality of chances for everyone, longing to achieve inclusion and getting away from stigmatization, which only repeats exclusion.

The results of this research will be deepened in the scholar's doctoral thesis². It will include visually impaired students from the National University of La Plata to assess the impact (if any) that guidance interventions do in the career choice.

² *Vocational Guidance in people with special educational needs as the result of visual impairment during the transition stage from high school to advanced education.* Director: Phd. Mirta Gavilán, National University of La Plata.